

“Self-development” of the subjects of the Federation as a priority of the state policy for regional development in the Russian Federation

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Abstract. Currently, the policy of regional development and regulation of the spatial structure of the Russian economy is characterized by a number of innovations. In particular, the need for new approaches and tools in solving the problem of positive economic alignment of the subjects of the Federation is revealed. The traditional toolkit for solving this task, which was mainly focused on massive “infusion” of funds into economically lagging regions, especially in the form of budget subsidies, did not justify itself and did not provide a real overcoming of interregional differentiation. A significant effect in solving this strategic task can be achieved only due to typification of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation in the framework of implementing the federal regional policy, as well as in shifting the focus of this policy to the formation of conditions and incentives for the “self-development” of the Russian regions. The continuation of the political course on decentralization of management, when it is organically linked to a single strategy for reforming the economic and legal foundations of Russian federalism, remains an important task.

Keywords: self-development, economic alignment, regional development, interregional differentiation

1. Introduction

The solution of a whole range of methodological and purely practical problems associated with the transition to a strategic planning system, especially in its spatial context, largely led a great number of researchers and policy practitioners to return to the issue of regional economic alignment. Traditionally, this question was considered as the key one in the regional policy of any state. Moreover, this issue is relevant for Russian conditions, when real progress in overcoming such differentiation is not only a condition for maintaining a single “field” of economic and social development of the country, but also a measure of effectiveness of the entire economic and legal mechanism of federal relations, the basis of state stability and national security.

2. “Self-development” as a Research Problem in Regional Studies

In the previous period, a positive economic alignment of the subjects of the Federation practically dropped out of the circle of the most actively studied problems of national regionalism. The current “renaissance” of this topic requires moving away from repeating the already developed theses of the past and giving this problem a new sound. Of course, many thoughts are quite valid today, such as (a) whether the economic alignment of regions occurs or not; (b) what are its current parameters, and (c) what goals in this regard should be set for the future. Without answering these questions, it is difficult to count on filling the task of economic leveling of the regions with a qualitatively new content.

There is no consensus in understanding initial positions on this issue not only among experts but even at the government level. For instance, the Strategy for the Economic Security of the Country until 2030 was adopted in January 2017 [1]. In this document (paragraph 24), “[...] unevenness of the spatial development of the Russian Federation, strengthening differentiation of regions and municipalities in terms of the level and pace of socio-economic development” are designated to be the emerging threats to the Russian economy. With a long delay, 2 years later, the Government of Russia adopted the Spatial Development Strategy of the Russian Federation [2]. The strategy concludes that this differentiation is reduced. Where is the truth? At the same time, unlike the original versions of this strategy, its authors eventually abandoned a quantitative illustration of reducing interregional differentiation as one of the most important theses of their document. This indicates that they either doubt the declared thesis or are not sure of the methodological basis of their calculations.

The following questions arise. First, how should the indication of the Economic Security Strategy regarding the need to reduce the level of interregional differentiation in the economic development of the subjects of the Federation be considered? Second, what is the current priority or a belated reference point? And the Spatial Development Strategy also does not give an answer the problem that the supposedly achieved reduction in interregional economic differentiation is already considered a solution to this problem in essence! Or is further progress needed in this direction?

From the point of view of contemporary ideas about the permissible measure of economic equalization of regions, a number of observations should be made.

First, it is necessary to take into account that comparisons in terms of per capita GRP only illustratively illustrate and even reduce the real extent of interregional economic differentiation. This is due to the fact that the GRP size of the subsidized regions is experiencing the multiplier effect of various channels of the infusion of federal funds into the economy of these regions. In this regard, assessments of interregional economic differentiation and monitoring of its long-term trends still need further improvement.

Second, taking into account innovation modernization as an objective trend in the development of the Russian economy, the key signs and indicators of interregional differentiation are increasingly shifting to indicators of innovation activity. It is precisely the positive progress in this direction that can ensure the unity and integrity of the Russian economy, prevent its territorial “stratification” into qualitatively different and weakly interacting technological structures. Meanwhile, such a stratification is a real fact, especially if we evaluate the differences that characterize the Russian regions in terms of how innovativeness their economies are.

Third, one should objectively evaluate the extent to which targets for the economic equalization of regions may reflect the possibilities of consciously managing this process. There is clearly a dual situation. On the one hand, it is difficult to imagine a “workable” strategy for the spatial development of a country without some idea that it is economically possible and expedient to reduce interregional economic differentiation. Without having a clear guideline, any policy inevitably loses its constructive character. On the other hand, we have not yet been able to set such economically sound guidelines in this case.

There are attempts to approach the problem of “optimal leveling measures” from the perspective of employment and labor migration. In this interpretation, the optimal leveling measure coincided with the creation of a sufficient number of jobs (now one could say high-performance jobs) in each region, overcoming the outflow of labor resources from less developed regions to more developed ones. However, that way of determining the “optimal measure” of leveling is most promising. This will proceed from a significant reduction in gaps existing in the level of innovativeness of regional economies with all objective differences and in their structural characteristics.

It is impossible not to conclude that overcoming interregional differentiation is not only the result of certain measures of state economic policy, but also it is the result of institutional changes affecting the key foundations of the Russian federal statehood.

3. Issues of Economic Alignment

The issues of economic alignment of the subjects of the Federation, primarily in the context of analyzing the prospects for federal policy of regional development, have already been reflected in the domestic economic literature [3]. What is self-development, in particular, in connection with the situation in the regional link of the Russian economy? As the analysis of scientific literature shows, in relation to this category, there is not only a wide variety of definitions, but also there are fundamental approaches to this phenomenon.

First of all, of course, we should exclude from the attention any interpretations of “self-development” that could be associated with “autarky,” isolationism and rejection of the constant expansion of inter-regional economic exchange. Further, it should be noted that researchers viewed and view “self-development” not as a complete alternative to the federal promotion of raising economically weaker, chronically depressed regions, but as an addition to this policy, which significantly increases the chances of success in economic alignment.

Transition to a strategic planning system, including at the regional level of management, requires a new approach to understanding the essence of the “regional self-development” and the ways of its practical implementation. The Spatial Development Strategy and the Federal Law on Strategic Planning [4] do not contain the term “self-development.” More than that, it is not found in any other currently available regulatory documents relating to the spatial “slice” of such a strategizing [5]. Such a situation should be recognized as quite natural, given the diversity of opinions that accompanies today both the interpretation of the concept of “self-development” and the idea of how it can be achieved in the regional policy of the state. The conditions and mechanisms of regional self-development require further theoretical and methodological research and practical approbation. However, we should avoid two extremes. On the one hand, reducing of the model of regional self-development to the list of organizational and managerial measures is not permissible. On the other hand, the concept of “self-development” should not be considered too scientific, leading to such an extent that it cannot be specifically implemented in the strategic documents of the socio-economic development of the subjects of the Federation.

In our view, the transition to a model of regional self-development is not only and not so much an economic problem (especially in a rather primitive understanding of budget self-sufficiency), but it is a product of deep institutional and legal changes in society and the state. Mainly, we are talking about changes focused on the balance of powers and responsibilities of all parts of the vertical of public power. We are talking about a sustainable and comprehensively balanced spatial development of the country. The federal center does not want to share powers to the same extent that the regions are not ready or simply do not want to accept them. Today, the regions steadily take this position, rightly believing that additional powers always mean additional responsibility and additional problems, especially if these powers are not supported by the necessary economic resources. In such a situation, the incentive effect of decentralization of authority turns out to be almost zero.

In this regard, we believe that the basis of regional self-development is a consistent, comprehensively secured acceptance of responsibility for their sustainable socio-economic development (above all). But in order to direct this process in a constructive way, we need to approach the case “from the other end.” Namely, it should be done regulatory: we need to fix the meaning and scope of such a thing as “the responsibility of the federal center for the socio-economic development of the subjects of the Federation.” Today, the task of economic alignment of regions is presented not as a firm commitment, but only as a gesture of “goodwill” on the part of the federal center. It is not by chance that in the program-strategic documents of the federal level, the indicated task is either indicated or disappears.

4. Key Research Results

The federal policy of regional development should not focus on alignment indicators (although it cannot be ignored), but it should concentrate on the legal, institutional, and economic prerequisites for the approval of the model of self-development of the Russian regions. This implies the implementation of a number of important principles in the federal policy of regional development.

It is about the constitutional provision that fixes that all the subjects of the Russian Federation are equal in relations with the federal bodies of state power. However, according to many experts, the idea of absolute symmetry in the distribution of powers (as well as the binding nature of a uniform model of financial equalization, etc.) does not follow from this provision [6]. The so-called “regulated asymmetry,” which affects not the basic status of the subjects of the Federation but only the range of regulatory powers available to them, could well become a model for the development of Russian federalism.

5. Discussion

The problem with all these documents was that they were earlier aimed primarily at fixing those or other additional powers of the subjects of the Federation, not strengthening responsibility for their execution. In addition to the transfer of powers on a contractual basis (and in order to stimulate regional self-development), it is advisable to introduce the following. For a certain, economically leading group of subjects of the Federation, it is advisable to introduce an institution of a limited range of “initiative powers” in the fiscal sphere in particular. Their adoption should be balanced by an additional measure of responsibility of the state power of the subjects of the Federation for the socio-economic results of such an initiative.

Targeted reorientation of all tools of the federal regional policy (using several models of intergovernmental relations; localization of state programs, those or other types of federal development institutions) to specific types of regions should be a powerful factor in the self-development of regions. Such typification should take into account both quantitative economic parameters and qualitative characteristics of the regional economy.

6. Conclusion

Self-development as a dominant of the federal regional development policy implies achieving a qualitatively new level of institutionalization of this policy. Sluggishness with the preparation of the Spatial Development Strategy of the Russian Federation confirms this fully.

The implementation of these conditions will make it possible to switch to a model of regional state policy, focused primarily on the self-development of the subjects of the Federation. This is a model of such a policy of the federal center, when highly developed regions will not endlessly complain about the “pumping out” of their growth resources. In turn, less developed, subsidized regions will receive a real leverage to overcome dependency tendencies and consistently reach the regime of resource sufficiency for economic growth and innovative modernization of their economic and social complexes.

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